‘A Sense of Dooming Boom’:
Kerouac’s Psychopathic Aesthetics of Speed in *Big Sur*

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Big Sur occupies a special place in Kerouac’s writings. In *Big Sur*, published in 1960, the late Kerouac stages the narrator’s downfall, which in great measure echoes the writer’s own falling into disgrace. The reader attends Jack Duluoz’s spiralling into mental decay and physical exhaustion, signifying the defeat of the forces of desire; a breakdown concomitant with his relocation to the Californian area of Big Sur, initially envisioned as a perfect getaway from the city. In fact, this reclusion is counterproductive, and largely responsible for the sense of stasis that engulfs him in return.

What I want to show in this paper, is that the dramatic intensity of this novel relies on the tension conveyed by a prose that is intricately modernist and performative, an aesthetic strategy that brings a radical contrast to *Big Sur* in particular. In Kerouac’s works, the writing is indexed on the very movements of consciousness of the writer: it suffuses the prose with a fluidity that is typical of Kerouac’s technique, and that is set against the nullifying fixity of the narrative.

This tension is brought into the narrative via the character of Cody – the narrator's partner in crime, also known as Dean Moriarty in *On The Road*. Cody is introduced in *Big Sur* in terms that are largely homoerotic, emphasising his ebullient nature and restless temperament: 'And tho the wild frenzies of his old road days with me have banked down he still has the same taut eager face and supple muscles and looks like he's ready to go anytime'.[1] His eagerness to 'go anytime' is ontologically revealing: it typifies a form of being in motion, highly energetic, impulsive and fugacious; in fact, the antithesis of what Duluoz has become.[2]

As in his previous novels, Kerouac conveys Cody's frantic engagement through the trope of the automobile:

> There he is wearing goggles working like Vulcan at his forge, throwing tires all over the place with fantastic strength, 'this one's no good' down on another, bing, bang, talking all the time a long fantastic lecture on tire recapping […] Rushing up and ripping tires off car wheels with a jicklo, clang, throwing it on the machine, starting up big roaring steams but yelling explanations over that, darting, bending, flinging, flaying, till Dave Wain said he thought he was going to die laughing or cry right there on the spot.[3]

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[1] Jack Kerouac, *Big Sur* [1962] (London: Flamingo, 2001), p. 58.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid., p. 60.

Here, the reference to mechanical sports functions as a metonymy to signify Cody's colossal energy and yearning for movement. Cody's new occupation as tire recapper may be viewed as a form of driving by proxy. It is as if Cody were driving at full speed, as Kerouac renders his impetus mythical – through the simile of Vulcan – as well as physical, through several onomatopoeias and the juxtaposition of action verbs in gerundive form. Later in the novel:

> When Cody comes to a narrow tight curve with all our death staring us in the face down that hole he just swerves the curve saying 'The way to drive in the mountains is, boy, no fiddlin around, these roads dont move, you're the one that moves'.[4]

Through colloquial language, Kerouac renders Cody's own self mobile and makes it coincide with mechanical velocity. The insatiable energy that Cody encapsulates, as it finds a physical extension through the device of the automobile, is a permanent challenge addressed to the forces of immobility, conservatism and stasis. As Cody fuses with the machine, we might say that his driving is confounded with his being, a death-defying entity both ontologically and textually, a negation of 'all [their] death[s] staring [them] in the face'.[5]

The fierce momentum and resolute forwardness that Cody encapsulates is transferred into the writing, as Cody's direct speech reflects:

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[4] Ibid., p. 114.
[5] Ibid.

> '[…] so we've come here to not only thank you and see you again but to celebrate this, and on top of all that, occasion, goo me I'm all so gushy and girly, hee hee hee, yes that's right come on in children and then go out and get that gear in the car and get ready to sleep outdoors and get that good open fresh air, Jack on top of all that and my heart is jess OVERflowin I got a NEW JOB!! Along with that splissly little old beautiful new jeep! A new job right downtown in Los Gatos […] now Ma you come in here, meet old Pat McLear here, start up some eggs or some of that steak we brought, open up that vieen roossee wine we brought for drunk old Jack that good old boy […]'.[6]

The interplay on sounds and the use of onomatopoeias, alliterations and rhythmic phrases such as 'drunk old Jack that good old boy' convey a tone enthusiastic and almost child-like.[7] Simultaneously, the straightforward expression of affects in this passage is made physical through an unruly syntax that mimics the emotional thrust of actual talk, as if the reader himself were attending to the scene. Short words, along with minimal punctuation, strengthen the velocity of the passage. As Cody moves from one idea to the other without finishing, his speech exemplifies a continuum that corresponds, above all, to a sense of instantaneity.

This impression is an effect of Kerouac's writing technique: '(TIMING) Nothing is muddy that *runs in time* and to *laws of time* – Shakespearian stress of

[6] Ibid., p. 109.
[7] Ibid.

dramatic need to speak now in own unalterable way or forever hold tongue'.[8] That is to say, Kerouac's writing relies on the streaming of his multifarious, immediate perceptions of the here and now to give the *illusion* of spontaneity. Such a method of composition echoes that of friend and poet Allen Ginsberg, who advised Kerouac to '(s)peak now, or ever hold your peace, write whatever comes to mind'.[9] This is what creates a permanent outflow in the prose, the sensation processed into words as directly and as quickly as possible. This transient feature at the core of Kerouac's prosody turns the writing into something remarkably fluid. For Michael Hrebeniak, 'the motive is not to contain [Cody] but to understand and register his energies inside an open field without compromise'.[10] It implies that, through Cody's speech, nothing simply is; everything *becomes*. Or, in Kerouac's own terms: 'STRUCTURE OF WORK […] language shortens in race to wire of time-race of work, following laws of Deep Form'.[11] Such a premise shows that for Kerouac, form precedes the essence of his writing; this is what defines its contents to a great extent.

Form preceding essence… We can take our cue from Jean-Paul Sartre: 'For if indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one's actions by reference to a given and specific human nature; in other words, there is

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[8] Kerouac, 'Essentials of Spontaneous Prose' [1959], in *The Portable Beat Reader*, ed. by Ann Charters (London: Penguin Classics, 1992), pp. 57-58 (p. 57).
[9] Allen Ginsberg, 'Early Poetic Community', Interview with Robert Duncan, in *Allen Verbatim*, ed. by Gordon Ball ((New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), pp. 131-50 (p. 144)).
[10] Michael Hrebeniak, *Action Writing: Jack Kerouac's Wild Form* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006), p. 62.
[11] Kerouac, 'Essentials of Spontaneous Prose', in *The Portable Beat Reader*, ed. by Charters, pp. 57-58 (p. 58).

no determinism – man is free, man is freedom'.[12] We may add, since *form* precedes essence in Kerouac's writing, then the *writing* is free, the *writing* is freedom. Thus, Kerouac renders Cody's whole being concomitant with motion *and*, to a large extent, with the phenomenological movement of Sartrean engagement: for Sartre, '[t]here is no reality except in action'.[13] This inextinguishable flow, which emanates from the writer's innermost perceptions and which is propelled outwards, enables Kerouac to produce a method of writing that creates its own substance. Such a form of becoming, which is embedded in the writing, may be conceived as an end in itself. For Hrebeniak: 'Form emerges through inviting every observation, whether fortuitious or not, to enter the work, an unembodied momentum that demands a shape without prior existence, and makes of art […] a power, not a construction'.[14] In such a context, art is devised as power; as a field of raw energies, a form of performativity that is radical and ecstatic.

Nevertheless, as every phrase that comes into being rushes towards collapse, all shapes become provisional. In fact, the sense of commotion and mobility that radiates from Kerouac's radical aesthetics turns the text into a performance that writes itself into being, a being that simultaneously rushes towards its own demise:

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[12] Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Existentialism & Humanism' [1946], trans. by Philip Mairet, 3rd edn (London: Methuen, 2007), pp. 37-38.
[13] Ibid., p. 47.
[14] Hrebeniak, p. 173.

> At one point I'm sitting in the sand as Cody walks up my way, I say to him imitating Wallace Beery and scratching my armpits 'Cuss a man for dyin in Death Valley' […] and Cody says 'That's right, if anybody can imitate old Wallace Beery that's the only way to do it, you had just the right timber there in the tone of your voice there, *Cuss a man for dyin in Death Valley* hee hee yes' but he rushes off to talk to McLear's wife ...[15]

Kerouac's presentation of Cody engenders an aesthetic of immediacy without beginning or end: one that self-destroys as soon as it comes into existence. In this sense, Kerouac's prosody exemplifies a poetics that is strikingly ambivalent: while it celebrates the manifestation of energy, of forcefulness and of motion on the page, it remains transitory and highly unstable. This poetics articulates the motif of self-destruction *within* the writing itself, through a prose that is quintessentially performative and fluid, but also intrinsically self-destructive.

This ecstatic performativity, which is built into the writing and which is largely ambivalent, echoes Norman Mailer's notion of the 'psychopathic'.[16] In his essay 'The White Negro' (1957), Mailer presents a radical type of ontology in the context of the 1950s in America, one that seeks to challenge the status quo and which, like that of Cody, is foregrounded in physical energy. For Mailer:

> Movement is always to be preferred to inaction. In motion a man has a chance, his body is warm, his instincts are quick, and when the crisis

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[15] *Big Sur*, p. 112.

[16] See Norman Mailer, 'The White Negro' [1957], in *The Penguin Book of the Beats*, ed. by Ann Charters (London: Penguin Books, 1993), pp. 582-605.

> comes, whether of love or violence, he can make it, he can win, he can release a little more energy for himself since he hates himself a little less, he can make a little better nervous system, make it a little more possible to go again, to go faster next time and so make more and thus find more people with whom he can swing.[17]

The procreative movement that Mailer describes is deeply rooted in the senses. For Mailer, this physical and instinctual impetus, which is deliberately untamed, is at the origin of the figure of the psychopath – a prototype of the social outcast, which in Mailer's essay is provocatively revered:

> At bottom, the drama of the psychopath is that he seeks […] an orgasm more apocalyptic than the one which preceded it. Orgasm is his therapy […]. But in this search, […] the apocalyptic orgasm often remains as remote as the Holy Grail, […] so the conditions of his life create it anew in him until the drama of his movements bears a sardonic resemblance to the frog who climbed a few feet in the well only to drop back again.[18]

The psychopath is primarily articulated through an organic and unrepressed force – channelling his sex drive – *and* regularly battered by a tremendous wave of destruction.

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[17] Ibid., p. 596.
[18] Ibid., p. 593.

Here, a correspondence may be established between Cody's masculine and impulsive expression of his stamina, and Mailer's provocative description of the psychopath's indomitable energies. Cody's compulsion to act is grounded in an impetus that is controlled almost exclusively by his instincts, which in Kerouac's work – and *a fortiori* in Mailer's ontological model – are highly corporeal, animalistic and sexualised, where every fantasy formulated by the instinctual self requires instant fulfilment. In a practical sense, Cody – despite the prodigious intensity of his physical and sensual engagement with the world – is consumed all too soon by his own lust for life and can never reach the object of his desire. As the narrator remarks, watching Cody chopping wood: '[…] it was like an example of vast but senseless strength, a picture of poor Cody's life and in a sense my own'.[19] Earlier in the text: 'Cody gives you a sense of dooming boom'.[20] The alliterative 'dooming boom' is also a booming doom; the form of being he personifies is as explosive as it is implosive.[21] In other terms, Cody's energy is huge, but blind and senseless, like that of Mailer's psychopath: both aim at nothing but release for its own sake, which makes the nature of their engagement with the world primarily sexual but also intrinsically onanistic and sterile. Consequently, Cody's energy is, paradoxically, mostly ineffectual: without any definite projective target, the energies released turn back on his own self.

Eventually, Cody's actions epitomise a crucial paradox; one that generates a series of unruly and wayward acts of creation that self-destroy as soon as they

[19] *Big Sur*, p. 91
[20] Ibid., p. 115.
[21] Ibid.

come into being. Hell-bent on velocity, thrusting his own self forward into the unknown, Cody nourishes a tremendous desire for a life whose ultimate apotheosis is self-annihilation, a trajectory that alludes to the aesthetics of Italian Futurism. This contradictory movement is primarily embedded in the writing, as we have seen; a writing that creates its own vortex within which all syntactical and narrative forms collapse. Therefore, for Cody in *Big Sur*, the compulsion to act, bolstered by an aesthetic of immediacy that aims at rendering textual forms fundamentally transient, is another way to both stave off and paradoxically embrace death. As Kerouac writes about Cody, 'wow that madman you can at least write on his grave someday "He Lived, He Sweated" – No halfway house is Cody's house'.[22]

[22] Ibid., p. 111.

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